

## Article

# Sexual transgression on the American stage: Clyde Fitch, Sapho, and the 'American Girl'

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*Saxon, Theresa ORCID: 0000-0002-2129-2570 (2013) Sexual transgression on the American stage: Clyde Fitch, Sapho, and the 'American Girl'. Literature Compass, 10 (10). pp. 735-747. ISSN 1741-4113*

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12101>

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‘Sexual Transgression on the American Stage: Clyde Fitch, *Sappho*, and the  
“American Girl.”’

‘Sexual Transgression on the American Stage: Clyde Fitch, *Sapho*, and the “American Girl.”’

Clyde Fitch’s play, *Sapho* (1900), is significant in the history of theatre censorship in America as a result of the arrests of the leading actress, Olga Nethersole, and several of her entourage. That *Sapho*, a play about a courtesan and her lovers, attracted such attention is notable. At the time of its performance, in 1900, the play was one of a series of ‘dramas of the brothel’ on stage: Katie N Johnson suggests that up to fifty plays ‘featuring prostitutes’ were performed in New York between 1898 and 1922, any one of which could have been considered as scandalous and improper as *Sapho* (1). Only the attempted staging of *Mrs Warren’s Profession*, in 1905, attracted anything like the negative publicity of *Sapho*. In 1898, two years before *Sapho* took to the stage, David Belasco’s similarly plotted courtesan drama *Zaza* had achieved success without significant censure and certainly not the virulent attacks that would be a feature of Fitch’s *Sapho*.

Critical analyses have focussed explicitly on the role of Nethersole in the censorship of the production. The very public role of Nethersole in the ‘drama’ of the *Sapho* court case has become the pivot for critical investigation. But the play as a dramatic production and the role of the playwright have been obscured by the media frenzy that led to the arrests and the subsequent furore. Nethersole was an intriguing actress, who repeatedly took the role of the ‘transgressor’ in her productions: but, as I will argue, so did several other key performers of the time. Nethersole’s expressed preference for ‘brothel dramas’ was not unusual in a theatrical era of emotional expressiveness. Other factors, therefore, need to be taken into consideration. This article looks to expand the critical landscape of the censorship of *Sapho*, exploring the unpublished Fitch scripts, as well as the critical reputation of the writer, the public reception and the media reaction that led to its closure and the arrests, in the wider

context of the show's performance (three extant Fitch typescripts reside in three libraries: the Billy Rose archives at the New York Public Library, the Fitch Archives at Amherst and the Tyler papers at the Princeton University Library. The latter two texts are identical, and appear to be completed versions of the play. In this article, quotations are taken from the two scripts housed at Amherst and Princeton). This article argues that *Sapho* became part of a moral crusade because Fitch, albeit unwittingly, dramatised the critical intersection between the erotics of sexual transgression and the cult of the 'American girl.' Further, Clyde Fitch's version of *Sapho* recognised the critical link between discourses of sexuality/purity and discourses of 'nervousness' that pervaded America at the turn of the century. In Fitch's hands, *Sapho* staged neurasthenic strategies intertwined with social fears of sexual transgression as a degenerative impulse in the 'progressive' era. To survive as the epitome of 'civilisation,' America crucially required the repeated and continuous modelling of the asexual body of the pure 'American girl'; *Sapho* had exposed the model, and the structuring impulses that participated in its formation. And it had done so on stage, before the very eyes of those putative 'American girls.'

Fitch's *Sapho* premiered in Chicago on 31 October 1899, then toured the circuit, before arriving in New York in February 1900. Prior to its arrival in New York, the American press was, overall, in accord that the show was a worthy spectacle, if thin on plotting and slightly risqué in content. The *New York Times* special report from the opening night in Chicago stated:

The production of Clyde Fitch's new play, "Sapho," by Miss Olga Nethersole, at Power's Theatre, tonight was a decided success. The playhouse was crowded to the doors by an enthusiastic audience, which gave the actress half a dozen curtain calls after every act. The opening performance [...] was a smooth and well-balanced performance [...] the rise of the curtain brought forth an outburst of applause, so beautiful was the stage picture. [...] All of the settings are of the highest order, as are the costumes. Miss Nethersole wore several beautiful and artistic gowns and coats at various stages of the action of the play. The performance was most favorably received [...] Miss Nethersole has several strong

scenes, and the impression she made to-night indicates that the play will be a permanent success. (1 November 1899)

The *Milwaukee Journal*, a little less restrained in its commentary, declared: “‘Sapho’ is upon the town! Everyone seems Sapho-crazy! They argue about the play, and about its performance, but they all go [...] Certainly the consensus of opinion is that Miss Nethersole has scored the undeniable triumph of her successful career’ (*Milwaukee Journal*, undated clipping, Clyde Fitch Archives, Amherst College, Box 3, folder 26) In Cincinnati, an anonymous call to the police caused an officer to be sent to observe a performance of the show: his response was, ‘that he could see no reason why the performance should be interfered with in any way’ (*Cincinnati Star*, undated clipping, Clyde Fitch Archives, Box 3, Folder 36). The officer found the play so inoffensive that he ‘confessed to having a slight suspicion that some person had perpetrated a joke on the police department, although there was a possibility that the gentleman who asked that an officer be sent to the theatre really was sincere in the stand he took’ (ibid). The critical reception, though mixed, did not suggest that there was anything particularly untoward in *Sapho* that would justify censorship.

The play, however, was greeted as anything but respectable on its arrival in New York. The *New York Times*’ review of the Chicago premier, cited above, in no way represents what to come from the New York press in response to *Sapho*, and it was yellow paper, the *World* that led the call to arms for censorship. *Sapho* opened in New York on 5 February 1900 at Wallack’s Theatre on Thirtieth and Broadway. The *World* printed a review of opening night with the provocative headline, ‘Mob frantic to see *Sapho* storms doors of the theatre’ (7 February 1900 14). In this extended review, the *World* organised a mock ‘trial’ of the play and found *Sapho* ‘guilty’ of moral bankruptcy: the charges, ‘corrupting the public’s morals, defiling the minds of youth, of indecency, depravity, levity, and unaesthetic influence’ (ibid). On 21 February, Olga Nethersole, the English actress who took the leading role of Fanny Le Grand, her co-star Hamilton Revelle, her tour manager Marcus Meyer, and

the manager of Wallack's theatre, Theodore Moss, were all arrested. During the initial hearing the play continued to run, but it was shut down formally by the police on 6 March, 1900. The initial complaint against *Sapho* that had been registered with magistrates came from *World* reporter, Robert Mackay. He accused the play of being 'the portrayal of a lewd and dissipated woman, [who] boasts publicly that she is the mistress of a man, and thereafter permits a man to carry her up a staircase in a vile and indecent manner' (*World* 22 February 1900 1). Such a commentary, one of many, makes clear that outrage – in the public eye – was directed towards the dramatic characterisation of the sexually transgressive Fanny Le Grand.

Olga Nethersole was such a prominent star on stage, and also throughout the court proceedings, and criticism, at the time and subsequently, has tended to focus on the actress. The *World's* review of *Sapho* concentrated its reports on Nethersole's reputation, concluding that the actress 'plays immoral women because she knows that such exhibitions excite a morbid curiosity which theatre goers as a class are always willing to gratify' (7 February 1900 14). Theatre critic William Winter was unconvinced by Nethersole, declaring, in his study of the actress in his collected memoirs, *Wallet of Time*, that her fame was a result of her 'devotion' to playing 'a parade of theatrical transgressors' (309-10). Nethersole had indeed carved a name for herself through performing women of 'sullied' reputation. In *Carmen*, she developed a form of extended physical contact that came to be known as the 'Nethersole kiss' (Strang 229). Nethersole's reputation as a star of 'dramas of the brothel' has remained pervasive and critical accounts of *Sapho* continue to focus on her 'transgressions' as a performer. John Houchin, for example, in his assessment of *Sapho* argues that censorship was a response to Nethersole, as she had 'distinguished herself by portraying problematic female characters whose checkered pasts often caused turmoil and grief' (41). Katie N Johnson's *Sisters in Sin* devotes a chapter to Nethersole in the role of Fanny Le Grand, arguing that the

play's notoriety was orchestrated by the British actress, who 'scandalised her audiences not only with a kiss, but with her whole body' (45).

But Clyde Fitch is an important playwright to consider in this context: his reputation as a writer of plays for women both on and off stage parallels the shifting role of the actress, and the changing shape of audiences in late-nineteenth American theatre. Richard Butsch points out that in the 1820s, 'the theatre was a men's club'; regardless of wealth and status, men of 'all classes regularly attended their favourite theatres with their friends' (374). By the end of the nineteenth century, though, women represented a significant number in the audience, particularly in attendance at the so-called 'legitimate' theatres of Broadway. Managers of such theatres, argues Butsch, had encouraged such a transition, with commerce as a driving force: middle-class women, with some disposable income, offered a new market for theatres. Butsch refers to this gendered reshaping of theatre audience as a shift from 'rowdy to tame,' where the previously drunken, catcalling male audience had given way to a demure female audience, sitting 'quietly in darkened theatres' (ibid). Don B. Wilmeth argues that, by the end of the nineteenth century, 'American theatre confined itself to innocuous material that supported middle-class virtues (e.g. monogamy, frugality, temperance, modesty)' and 'rarely challenged rigidly defined social conventions that depicted women as asexual beings who possessed little or no political or economic power' (148). The feminisation of the auditorium, Wilmeth suggests, led to the production of passive dramas that were denuded of any social relevance. But the history of theatrical production does not quite fit with this history of theatre, as the prominence of the 'brothel drama' demonstrates. 'Women's' theatre was producing challenging material that formed a performative dialogue with social conditions, both directly and symbolically, especially social conditions for women and particularly, as the nineteenth century wore away, in a form of production that came to be discussed, in the press, as 'dramas of the brothel,' which were performed at 'legitimate'

theatres, to a predominantly middle-class audience. Fitch's *Sapho*, as a dramatic play, slips aptly into this category as a drama of sexuality that appealed to the female audiences who were not passive and not quiet, and perhaps, even more worryingly for critics of the time, flocked to witness such dramas. And Fitch's *Sapho* became the catalyst for fears of the impact of such dramas on the 'purity' of the 'American girl,' who made up the bulk of the audience.

The production of 'brothel dramas' on American stages can be traced to the introduction of *Camille* onto American stages. A version of *Camille* had been played in New York in 1853, by Jean Davenport: 'pruned and purified,' as Bonnie Eckard attests, Davenport's *Camille*, subtitled *The Fate of a Coquette* was specifically framed to blame the fallen woman for her 'faults' (144). Laura Keane produced a version, in 1856, subtitled *A Moral of Life* that was less sanitised in content, and in overall characterisation of the 'fallen woman'; but, formulated in a guise of a dream, it closed with a reformed Marguerite, reunited with her mother's spirit in heaven. In 1857, the most popular version appeared, starring Matilda Heron and in 1874, Clara Morris also found success in the role. Bonnie Eckard argues that Heron and Morris both 'created a uniquely American Camille, that appealed to the audiences who apparently craved presentation of extreme emotionalism' (ibid). *Camille*, in its guise as an 'emotional' drama would continue, in revised versions, to appeal to audiences in New York's 'high' theatres, despite its disturbingly sexualised courtesan heroine, who trades on her looks, and 'buys' respectability. Whilst seeming to conform to moral convention, tending towards the punishment/spiritual restoration of the 'fallen' woman, the *Camille* dramas were also, directly and symbolically, staging transgressive gendered behavioural codes.

So *Sapho* was one of a series of dramas that had become popular at the end of the nineteenth century. And Olga Nethersole was herself one of a cast of actresses at the turn of



the century who were seeking such gritty, seamy roles. Characters like Fanny Le Grand – a women of ‘ill-repute’ around whom the plot would vibrate – were becoming the staple and mainstay in the repertoire of the late nineteenth-century actress. William Winter records that Matilda Heron, infamous for her adaption of Dumas’ *Camille*, in conversation with a playwright about a potential part, ‘wildly exclaimed, “give me a *lost* woman!”’ (*Vagrant Memories* 69). Even earlier, in 1867, actress Avonia Jones, in a letter to Augustin Daly, wrote:

‘I must tell you that my style is passionate. When I love it must be madly. Not the gentle, tender love that shrinks from observation, but the love that would sweep all before it and if thwarted would end in despair, madness and death. In fact in acting I am more fond of being bad than good. Hate, revenge, despair, sarcasm and resistless love I glory in; charity, gentleness and the meeker virtues I do not care for.’ (*Life of Augustin Daly* 58)

Jones took lead roles in two Daly adaptations: *Judith, The Daughter of the Merari* (1864) and *The Sorceress* (1864). In the former, Jones played the biblical ‘heroine’ Judith, who seduced and murdered Holofernes. Kim Marra notes that Jones’ Judith becomes a far more sexualised creature, seen in publicity shots for the play, wearing, ‘a heavy, richly embroidered royal robe, draped to expose the smooth flesh of her neck and bare right shoulder and arm’ (*Strange Duets* 3). Judith is shaped, therefore, as a form of powerful seductress, luring Holofernes to his death: the figure of the heroine, who saved Israel from attack, becomes, in this late nineteenth-century guise, a femme fatale of the ‘brothel drama’. Intriguingly, the style of dress adopted by Jones for Judith foreshadows the costuming of Olga Nethersole as Fanny Le Grand, with its similarly evocative pose and seductively exposed bared flesh.

Olga Nethersole was, as noted above, famous for playing ‘transgressors’; whilst such a reputation suggests that she, in common with many late nineteenth century actresses expressed a preference for such roles, it is also a sign of what was available for a star actress. In the era that followed the successes of adaptations of *Camille* and *Carmen* there were frequent productions of plays featuring ‘immoral’ women, such as James Herne’s *Margaret*

*Fleming* (1890), Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* (1893) and *The Notorious Mrs. Ebbsmith* (1895), and of course David Belasco's 1898 adaptation of *Zaza*. Plays foregrounding the figure and personality of the 'prostitute' had become staple fare. Indeed, a version of *Sapho* had already been performed successfully in New York: in March 1895, Daudet's own adaptation of his infamous novel, in collaboration with Adolphe Belot, opened at Abbey's theatre, starring French actress Réjane. There was nothing unusual about such sensual spectacles. That Fitch's version of *Sapho* was singled out and made an 'example' is significant.

The publicity and subsequent criticism surrounding Nethersole has clouded the role of the playwright and the relevance of the script. Fanny Le Grand was a scandalous character, in part because Nethersole attracted scandal; but so did Clyde Fitch. Exploration of his reputation contributes to an understanding of the scandal that *Sapho* attracted and the wider cultural anxieties that were tangled with the attempt to censure. Clyde Fitch was himself, by 1900, somewhat notorious, and not just as a playwright. In his youth, he had been an unusual student at Amherst College, attracting attention for his impersonations of female roles in college productions, as well as for his 'aesthetic' style of living. One of his old college peers, William Lyon Phelps, summarised Amherst's reaction to Fitch: 'we thought that he was effeminate, a mollicoddle, a sissy' (143). In 'business' America, Fitch stood out, through his aesthetic sensibilities, appearing to be, in Montrose Moses' words, 'something of a dandy' (Moses and Gerson 48).

In Fitch's background was a shady set of relations with the Aesthetic movement in England, and a very close association with Oscar Wilde (For accounts of Fitch and Oscar Wilde see Kim Marra, 'Clyde Fitch's Too Wilde Love' (2002) and Gary Schmidgall, *The Stranger Wilde: Interpreting Oscar* (1994)). Theatre critic William Winter was no less critical of Fitch than he was of Nethersole – and his attacks were as personal. In one account,

Winter referred to Fitch as one of the ‘weak sisters of the male sex, or of no sex at all’ (*Wallet of Time* 315). Such a comment foregrounds the ambiguity that surrounded Fitch’s sexuality, an ambiguity that attracted negative attention. Fitch’s living arrangements, and his wider friendships also marked out his difference according to the standard of American masculinity and heterosexuality: his agent was Elisabeth Marbury, who had set home with actress Elsie de Wolfe; his major syndicate producer was confirmed bachelor Charles Frohman, who established a form of ‘home’ with his long-time companion, Charles Dillingham (Griffin 2002 69; Marcossan 1915).

Yet for all such negative press, Fitch was also a successful and popular playwright. *Sapho* was one of the sixty-two plays that Fitch wrote or adapted in the course of his career, and in 1900, he had four plays running on Broadway. Following the ‘scandal,’ Fitch distanced himself from *Sapho*, which may have contributed to the infrequent critical exploration of his dramatic script. By the time Nethersole was acquitted, Fitch was in Morocco and on his way to Spain. Whether, at this point, he still had financial interests in the play is unlikely. The *Boston Evening Transcript* recorded that Olga Nethersole, her brother Louis and her then tour manager George Clare, signed affidavits attempting to block a production of *Sapho* in at the Bowdoin Theatre in Boston, written by William V. Ranous, on the grounds that ‘the play contains scenes, incidents, characters, situations and dialogue, taken directly from the plaintiff’s play’ (17 May 1900). The judge declined to interfere with the production on the grounds that ‘Clyde Fitch had no more right to the dramatisation of the book, “Sapho,” than anyone else’ (ibid). Although Fitch is mentioned here as a playwright, he was not involved in the action. Critical opinion has continued to remove Fitch from the scene, and place Nethersole firmly at the centre. Katie N Johnson, particularly, argues that ‘Nethersole’s name might not have been on the script, but she was instrumental in shaping the project’ (47). Exploration of Fitch’s professional behaviour, though, and his relations with

actors and actresses suggest that this would have been unusual in the playwright. Nethersole may have asked Fitch to undertake the dramatisation, but whether he would have countenanced significant interference, with this or any of his play scripts, is debatable.

In his correspondence Fitch makes repeated reference to attempts made by actors to ‘improve’ on his work. Even in his very first production, *Beau Brummel*, which was written, at the request of Richard Mansfield, a ‘star’ performer, as *Sapho* had been requested by Nethersole, Fitch is seen standing his ground: ‘to suit a star actor,’ he wrote to friend Grace Mosher, ‘is a difficult piece of work, and one needs *strength, stubbornness*, and a great diplomacy,’ though he also notes the value, to the playwright, of ‘a *yielding power* when necessary’ (Moses and Gerson 51/2). There had been a mini-scandal in New York, when William Winter claimed – in public – that *Beau Brummel* had been conceived by himself and Mansfield, and that Fitch was a mere amanuensis: Fitch responded in kind, with an open letter published in the *Tribune*, 13<sup>th</sup> April, 1891: ‘Mr Mansfield,’ declared Fitch, ‘is not the author of “Beau Brummel”’ (ibid 65). Fitch did acknowledge that in the concept of playwriting, collaboration between a star actor and a playwright was invaluable, but that the ultimate hand that guided the dialogue and much of the stage business was that of the writer. When another actor tried to interfere with the ending of *A Modern Match*, Fitch wrote: ‘Pitou and I are still at X with it. He is determined that I shall alter the last act and *kill off my bad lady!* And I insist that she shall live and be divorced *au naturel*’ (ibid 64). Such a commentary is significant in the context of discussion of *Sapho*, as both a ‘vehicle’ for Nethersole, and as a dramatic production. Fanny Le Grand was not Fitch’s first dramatisation of a ‘bad lady.’ Fitch did not write many ‘bad ladies’ – his writing focussed more on the exploration of the middle-class ‘American Girl’ as theatrical material – but in the instances he did, his attitude did not quite conform with that of the major moralists of the time. It may be

that, overall, Fitch and Nethersole coincided in their view of the outcome for the sexual transgressor.

No doubt Nethersole's emotionally expressive acting style made a significant impact on the role of Fanny Le Grand – but the role was written for her by Fitch, with her and her preference for sexual transgressors very much in mind, and also responded to the popularity of such sexual transgressors with theatregoers. As was his directorial style, Fitch was present at rehearsals of *Sapho*, and participated fully in the ordering of scenery and setting, as well as the nuances of characterisation in performance. He had also been in contact with Nethersole about her range of costumes for the part. In an undated press clipping from *The New York Times*, Nethersole is reported as stating: 'for the first act there are four dresses which I have to choose from. One Mr. Fitch wants me to wear, and I had it made because he wanted it' (Clyde Fitch Archives, Box 3, Folder 11). Montrose Moses comments on Fitch's attention to detail at rehearsal:

At first managers used to smile at the particular care Fitch gave to detail; they thought him meticulous; they could not understand why he insisted so ardently on the perfection of small things; they thought it unnecessary for him thus to wear away his strength. But Clyde, unheeding, went about his work in his individual way and won a reputation on the very points scored against him.' (Moses and Gerson 86)

Such commentaries, situating Fitch as a guiding hand in dramas that bore his name, were repeated throughout his theatrical life.

Certainly, *Sapho* was a product of Nethersole's acting temperament and production style: she ran her own company and frequent disagreements with her American agents suggest that she was particular in what she wished to achieve. But Fitch was keen to both preserve and develop his reputation as a playwright and he was an active participant, as was his wont, in the rehearsals of the play. On 29<sup>th</sup> October, he wrote to Virginia Gerson, from Chicago: 'here things go smoothly but are not ready, and so we don't play till *Tuesday*. We are all dead, *rehearsing at night [...] till 5 AM!!*' (Moses and Gerson 161). The *Chicago*

*Chronicle* conducted an interview with Fitch prior to the first night, and reported that ‘the playwright had faith that “Sapho” is to add laurels to his reputation and to that of Miss Nethersole as well. He said both beliefs grew stronger after witnessing a rehearsal of the play in the afternoon’ (Undated clipping, Clyde Fitch Archives, Amherst College, Box 3, folder 18). The virulent response to *Sapho* in New York would, therefore, have taken Fitch by surprise.

Though we can make a case for Fitch’s own conceptualisation of and design for the eventual social redemption of Fanny Le Grand and the dramatic direction of the play, his aim seems to have been, from the moment that *Sapho* began to attract violent antipathy in the press, to distance himself from his play, intellectually, psychologically, and literally. Not just Fitch, but his friends, sought to extricate him from the *Sapho* stage. When Archie Bell published his recollections of Fitch, he was as concerned, specifically, as subsequent critics have been, to lay the blame at Nethersole’s door. ““Sapho” was intended to create a stir,’ wrote Bell, ‘Miss Nethersole was expected to do just that very thing. Her audiences looked for a sensation’ (72). The scene that had caused the most sensation, in Act I, with Jean Gaussin carrying Fanny Le Grand up several flights of stairs, to her door – and into her bedroom, had been worked out by Fitch, states Bell, ‘as a startling incident vitally necessary to the development of the story’ (ibid 73). But, says Bell, Fitch ‘advised making it as brief as possible’; Nethersole claimed, in her rendition to be ““improving on the ideas of the author,”” and thus ‘created the looked-for sensation’ (ibid). Thus it was Nethersole, according to Bell, who corrupted Fitch’s script. Archie Bell was a long-time associate and friend of Fitch’s and though he also knew Nethersole well, and wrote on her successes as an actress, here he clearly wished to disconnect Fitch from the court room drama that followed the banning of *Sapho*.

Likewise, Montrose Moses attempted to disentangle Fitch from direct association. He reported that ‘such notoriety was distasteful to Clyde Fitch and put him under an unnecessarily nervous strain. In addition to which, Miss Nethersole suddenly swooped down upon him, temperamental and indignant. It was on the playwright’s shoulders that all the blame for the unexpected furor (sic) was piled’ (Moses and Gerson 160). Fitch was not indicted (at this time, his commercial interest in the production would have been completed), and as soon as could be arranged left on his annual tour of Europe. Whilst the court case was successfully overturned, and the run of *Sapho* resumed, he wrote from Spain, in a letter to Virginia Gerson, 12<sup>th</sup> April: ‘I happened on a paragraph about “Sapho” in an English newspaper, and Percy (his travelling companion) and I “broke a bottle of champagne,” and wished the play a long and pure existence! I only hope it *is* still going on’ (ibid 191).

So Fitch vanished from the stage, and even from the wings: however, there are particular features of his dramatic writing as well as his reputation as a sexually ambiguous aesthete that are crucial to the history of *Sapho*’s censorship. Fitch had become noted as a writer of plays for women about women, featuring female characters that appealed to that increasingly female audience at end of century theatres. Kim Marra has explored Fitch’s relationship with his female characters and his urge to write the ‘American Girl’ into being on stage – and to model her himself. Marra argues that Fitch’s involvement at rehearsals, his keenness to ‘instruct actresses in how to impersonate his ideal heroines’ became ‘a fulfilment of dominant gender injunctions for his largely female audiences,’ but at the same time, Fitch’s own impersonation of his characters, on behalf of actresses, ‘acceptably channelled’ his own ‘transvestite impulses,’ such as were visible in the theatrical performances of his college years (‘Lesbian Scholar/Gay Subject’ 235). Whilst *Sapho*, until its New York debut, had been received with a degree of critical bite, but little actual agitation, one report in the *Kansas City Journal* commented: ‘Clyde Fitch is more dangerous than Daudet’ (Undated

clipping, Clyde Fitch Archives, Amherst College, Box 3, folder 18). This comment is part of a review in the collection of Fitch's newspaper clippings: whilst the reviewer was making direct reference to the adaptation of the sexually transgressive woman, Fitch himself may have felt a more sinister undertone to the reviewer's assessment of 'danger'. Responding to the *Sapho* scandal with a nervous collapse, Fitch sensed the 'danger,' that his private life was on the brink of public exposure.

Fanny Le Grand, as Katie N Johnson notes, 'could hardly be mistaken for the pure American Girl' (51). The figure of transgressive gender, however, represented in his characterisation of Fanny Le Grand, was as central to Fitch's life as the 'American girl' was to his dramas. Marra has pointed out that Fitch owned a portrait of Salomé, bought on one of his early European trips, that was hung over the fireplace of his New York apartment. Salomé, argues Marra, a biblical transgressor, became, symbolically, 'the American Girl's dialectical opposite,' and her portrait, haunted by figures of demons, represented 'a spectre for Fitch [...] of what could happen to one who falls prey to uncontrolled desire' ('Lesbian Scholar/Gay Subject' 241, 243). The scandal that became associated with *Sapho* would also become a spectre that shadowed Fitch, a marker of what had happened, publicly, to the figure of the sexual transgressor. Whilst the portrait of Salomé sat in Fitch's private rooms, *Sapho* was on stage for all to see.

In *Sapho*, therefore, Fitch had staged the 'opposite' of the American girl, exploring the 'dialectic' and putting that figure into direct communion with the 'American girl.' With its direct focus on a sexual and powerful courtesan, the play enacted a social order threatened by bodies of non-conforming women. Kim Marra argues that the veneer of the 'American Girl' was 'a thin and tenuous cover for the repressed layers of putative perversion she was evolved to mask' (ibid 244). And that 'mask' had been seen to be slipping.



Fitch had drilled into the major fear of American civilisation: the imminent collapse of that civilisation. John Houchin argues that *Sapho* became a cause for reformers because it depicted ‘the type of woman that middle-class moralists feared’ (47). Fanny Le Grand was, he argues, ‘a fallen women,’ but ‘she was also repentant, redeemable, and capable of maternal devotion,’ an image of a redeemed feminine that ‘implied other women might behave in the same way without fear of punishment’ (ibid 46). In her analysis of the *Sapho* scandal, Katie N Johnson also argues that the characterisation of Fanny Le Grand offers the key to the censor’s attitudes: Fanny, Johnson argues, is ‘a casualty of her circumstances, a selfless woman whose crime is but that she loves’ (51). Both Houchin and Johnson suggest that it is Fanny’s capacity for emotional depth – in ‘devotion,’ her ‘love’ – for men and for her own child – that brought the play into conflict with censors; her redemption offended the critics, as she remains unpunished in closure. Fanny Le Grand is indeed dangerous for those reasons; but she is most deadly, I would suggest, because she rips the mask from the ‘American Girl’ and exposes her potential for erotic pleasure to public view. And the potential ‘degeneration’ of the ‘American Girl,’ is signalled, with clarity, by the popularity of *Sapho* on the American stage.

The play, as a construction of apparent ‘otherness’ to sexual purity, drew on other media productions that foretold the decay of the ‘American girl.’ At the time *Sapho* was written, Thomas Eakins was exhibiting portraits of women that clearly focussed on sexual exhaustion: his 1903 painting of actress Suzanna Santje, titled *An Actress*, features a supine, weary, female figure, arms bare, wearing a floating gown suggesting sexual debilitation. Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* was published in 1900, a few months following the *Sapho* ‘scandal,’ focussing on a young American woman exposed to the lures and excitements of the city and its theatres.

Even the ‘Gibson Girl’ illustrations began to signal sexual immorality and decline, as Amanda Glessman argues, bearing features of the ‘submissive and feminine,’ tradition, but also appearing to be ‘powerful and manipulative’ (59). Such representations of women in art, literature and then, most publicly on stage, combine to produce the characterisation of a dangerous female neurasthenic, a figure that Kathleen Spies situates as ‘conniving, power-hungry, sympathy-craving, passive-aggressive creatures who endangered innocent lovers and husbands or impressionable young women’ (42). George Beard M.D., whose diagnostics had been crucial to the establishment of the ‘American girl’ as a symbol of purity, also sowed the seeds for the degenerative impulses of that type. Beard argued that, ‘in civilized lands, (like America) women are more nervous, immeasurably, than men, and suffer more from general and special nervous diseases’ (*Nervous Exhaustion* 207). He also paid particular attention to the finely-wrought, exquisitely ‘chiselled’ beauty that he found to be typical of the American woman and marked distinctions between women of distinct categories of race, class and nation. White middle-class American women were ‘physically more delicate and nimble, and their susceptibility to external impressions far greater’ than their counterparts elsewhere’ (ibid 71). Although Fanny Le Grand (perhaps) redeems herself in an (arguably) moral closure that sees her acknowledge her role as mother, she also represents the dangerously sexualised femme fatale, who lures both the young American man, represented in the play by Jean Gaussin, and also, perhaps even more transgressively, the audience of young, susceptible ‘American girls.’ Fanny Le Grand cannot be contained in the category of ‘other’ to sexual purity.

At the beginning of the third act, Fanny and her lover Jean are living together, in mimicry of married life. Fanny confesses to her neighbour that she and Jean are not married: the neighbour responds, ‘get married now – on the quiet, nobody’d be any the wiser. Go on, it’s your duty’ (III; 8). The irony is clear: social convention has already been thwarted, but

the veneer of social respectability, with a marriage after the fact, can restore the propriety and sanctity of the marriage contract. Such a message flies absolutely in the face of the social codes that marked difference between proper and improper women: if one could not ‘know’ the difference, if ‘nobody’d be any the wiser,’ that marker becomes dislocated and the definitions of the pure ‘American girl’ and the ‘putrid’ transgressor disappear. As Jean Matthews points out, young women, were labelled ‘potentially sexual in nature and had to be hedged with external and internalised prohibitions to protect [their] purity – and thus marriageability’ (10). It was Fanny’s ‘duty’ to assume the mask of sexual convention, conceal the signs of her illicit sexuality and become a model for the perfect state of matrimony that was the destination of the ‘American girl.’

American women were located in the press as clamouring, dangerously, to see the performance of *Sapho*, a play that resonated with the world of the ‘Tenderloin.’ The ‘Tenderloin,’ an area associated with brothels, had become, throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, geographically aligned with the theatre districts of New York: Allan Churchill points out that ‘New York’s celebrated theatres [...] ran like a string of pearls through the blackhearted Tenderloin’ (12). A drama of ‘Tenderloin’ type, *Sapho* made its mark, indelibly, on contemporary audiences and spoke to a social order fearful of women as overtly sexual beings, condemning those who traded commercially in the market of sexual exchange. The relationship between the stages of New York and prostitution has been discussed in a range of texts – and social discourses linking the figure of the ‘harlot’ to the ‘actress’ are equally established (See Banks (1993); Guilfoyle (1992)). *Sapho* explores and dramatises a disruptive moment in the intertwined histories of America’s theatre, female sexuality, and the pathologising of gendered behaviours within the specific diagnostics of neurasthenia.

Fitch's dramatic adaptation of Alphonse Daudet's novel was set ostensibly in France, but explores specifically 'American' versions of a 'modern' phenomenon: a pathologised nervousness. By 1900, diagnoses of neurasthenia had become rampant in America (as they had elsewhere), both a symptom and a product of what David Schuster refers to as the 'neurasthenic nation.' Although the 'condition' of nerves was wide-spread across Europe, as well as America, there were, according to key psychologists George M. Beard and S. Weir Mitchell, specifically and diagnosable 'American' versions of the disease as a product of 'modern' urban conditions and a governing factor of life in the progressive era. The condition, which was initially a process of diagnostics for nervous disorders of Civil War veterans became appropriated for the specific task of addressing the shifting function of middle-class women in the public sphere. Though S. Weir Mitchell's work grew out of work done with soldiers experiencing trauma the post-Civil War era, his work became significantly gendered – as was experienced first-hand by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and lambasted in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892). This cultural discourse of neurasthenics drew on fears of degenerative impulses through its focus on the dangers posed by sexually explicit women to social convention located within medical discourses as potentially neurasthenic in tendency – and therefore susceptible to the suggestiveness of 'dramas of the brothel.'

George Beard had argued that neurasthenia could be found in a particular type of 'moral' decline demonstrated by women, 'erotomania'; like nymphomania, this was a disease of 'obsessive' sexuality. Erotomania was a 'psychical' disease where the 'victim' was 'exclusively occupied by the object of her thoughts,' suffering, 'illusions,' and 'hallucinations' (Beard *Sexual Neurasthenia* 95). Sexual fantasy, therefore, in neurasthenic discourses, was both pathologised and gendered. The susceptible young American woman, with her chiselled beauty and social grace, stood at the threshold of a neurasthenic condition,

inspired by fantasies of sex and sexuality, fantasies that were ably supplied in ‘dramas of the brothel,’ most conspicuously and publicly in *Sapho*.

Thus *Sapho* stands as a key marker for the pathology of nervousness as a disease, and as a cultural phenomenon. According to Beard, when sexual neurasthenia was diagnosed, the causes were ‘evil habits, excesses, tobacco, alcohol, worry and special excitements’ (ibid 15). For theatre workers, most of the items Beard lists were habitual; for *Sapho*’s Fanny Le Grand ‘excesses’ and ‘special excitement’ of an overtly sexual nature were factors of life. The motifs of sexuality are prominent throughout *Sapho*. The first act is set at a ball, and the appearance of courtesan Fanny Le Grand is pre-empted by dancers, ‘in a long line singing and dancing almost madly, with perfect abandon, across the stage’ (I; 1). The play overtly announces itself as a drama of sexual excitement and desire, a heady mix for Beard’s susceptible American women, who came in their thousands to see the play.

*Sapho*, as Olga Nethersole repeatedly argued, attempted to secure some sense of conventional morality: in the final act, Fanny ends her affair with her lover, the young Jean Gaussin, as she intends to marry Flamant and care for her son – performing her ‘duty’ as outlined in the third act. Fanny, therefore, would assume her place in society as the properly maternal body, modelling the ultimate destination of the ‘American girl’: marriage and motherhood. In the final scene of the play Fanny leaves Jean sleeping on a sofa, in the middle of the day, his body exemplifying both neurasthenic collapse and the ‘rest-cure’ advocated for the female sufferer of the condition. Jean Gaussin has been unmanned in every possible way, and the concluding attempt to restore conventional morality, through Fanny’s decision to complete a family unit, with Flamant and their child, is rendered void.

According to William Winter ‘the stage has been disgraced by the putrescent “Sapho”’ (*Wallet of Time* 376). *Sapho* was a ‘mire of filth [...] dark, dull and stupid [...] there can be no doubt as to its dirty character, or its pernicious tendency [...] a rigmarole of lust,

sap-headed sentimentality, and putrid nonsense' (ibid 315). Winter critiqued *Sapho* as the type of drama that excused its 'portrayal of licentiousness and turpitude,' by claiming that there was a 'moral lesson' to be learned (ibid). Crucially, such reactions in the press were not just in response to the influence of Fanny Le Grand on the young American professional 'brain-worker' but also as a product of her influence over the throngs of 'American girls' who came to watch her in action. In the third act, Fanny mocks Jean's idealisation of his former flame, the innocent, virginal Irene: "'purest" is she?' Fanny expostulates, '[w]ell I wouldn't be so sure about it. I've known plenty of these innocent country girls who were as bad as you can make 'em!' (III; 37). The threat is clear: Fanny Le Grand does not only infect and corrupt the moral rectitude of American man with her erotics, but she also demonstrates the erotic impulses of the 'American girl' concealed beneath the mask of 'purity.'

Thus the apparent power of Fanny's sexuality was not confined by the dramatic action: she lured the audience from beyond the footlights. Just three days before the *Sapho* arrests, the New York *World* published an article titled 'Sapho-Crazed Women Throng to See the Nethersole Play' (18 February 1900 17). The *World* had stationed six reporters around Wallack's theatre, in order to establish, with apparent authority, that, 'the great mass of the people on the main floor were young, attractive, bright-faced women' (ibid): 'American girls' were flocking to the degenerative power of the sexually hungry courtesan. 'Matrons' – ladies of a certain age – were few and far between. The report describes the audience as 'knowing':

Nothing passed their comprehension. Every phrase with a salacious meaning, thinly veiled – or deeply veiled, or not veiled at all, for that matter – earned its reward in knowing snickers and giggles. Those that were very broad indeed were often greeted with loud, hearty laughs. (ibid)

That young women would understand and laugh at the sexual proclivities of Fanny Le Grand was a major source of distress. In Beard's terms, such women were exhibiting signs of

‘erotomania,’ a psychic recognition of and desire for the pleasures of sex and sexuality, a contagion from the world of *Sapho*.

The *World* reporter recounted part of a conversation he overheard in the auditorium between two ‘middle-aged women, correctly gowned for a snowy afternoon, showing in face and toilet the unmistakable stamp of good breeding’ (ibid). One stated to the other at the close of the play: ‘no mature man or woman could possibly be injured by such mushy rot. But no young girl should be permitted in the theatre’ (ibid) One story, published in the *World*, ran with the headline: ‘Girl, Dazzled by “Sapho” Runs Away from Home’ (*World*, 23 February 1900 12). Though the connection between the play and the runaway was, at best, indirect, that *Sapho* had been located as a source of contamination is significant. At the heart of the drama that surrounded *Sapho* was the perceived threat to young people – young ‘American girls’ – exposed to their own sexual impulses.

In his closing remarks at the *Sapho* trial, the Assistant District Attorney declared to the jurors: ‘read the text of the play [...] and judge for yourself [...] do you propose it to raise its head here in the city of New York and have *Sapho* companies start all over the country?’ (*World*, 6 April, 1900 4). As far as the prosecution were concerned, it was the dramatic text itself that stood as the guilty party in the case, and the source of immorality that was contaminating American audiences, though Fitch himself had escaped indictment. Fitch had, albeit unconsciously, written a script that staged the major fear of his own life, to be exposed and publicly disgraced for transgressive sexual behaviours as Oscar Wilde had been. Fitch’s drama had, equally unwittingly, taken the pulse of America, a nation as fearful as the playwright himself could be, of the forces of exposure: the mask of the ‘American girl’ had slipped, in this moment of dramatic tension, and what lay beneath was open to speculation. The dominating figure of the transgressor had turned out to be, not so much in opposition to the ‘American girl,’ but, rather, a sign of her lack of substance.

Although the defendants were acquitted, and several versions of *Sapho* began to tour across American stages, the play never quite shed its invidious image. When, in 1895, Madame Réjane had toured with the version adapted by Alphonse Daudet and Adolphe Belot, the play did not attract much critical attention. But, when Réjane returned in 1904, just a handful of years after the Fitch-Nethersole *Sapho* scandal, it was regarded by the *New York Times* as a ‘painful exhibition of depravity’ (29 November 1904 6.) When Sarah Bernhardt performed the role in 1905, the play was described, likewise, as ‘pernicious’; that the infamous ‘staircase’ scene had been omitted from the play had failed, apparently, ‘to purge it of impropriety’ (*New York Times*, 15 December 1905). Despite its apparent attempt to redeem the courtesan and to redress the sexual excesses that the play dramatised, *Sapho*, in this and subsequent formats, had become a signal of moral decline. Through the staging of Fitch’s version of *Sapho*, the theatrical landscape had become marked by a neurasthenic version of the degenerated American man, feeble and witless in the hands of a sexually powerful, neurasthenic American woman, who had superseded Beard’s white middle-class nervous elite in controlling the direction of the nation. Clyde Fitch, though, had learned his lesson. He would never again write a play about such a powerful and public sign of potential sexual transgression.



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